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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 6124
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3814
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3673
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 4366
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHMCSSU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAAIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 4298

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000049

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN, SCA/PPD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/13/2020

TAGS: SOCI SCUL PGOV TX

SUBJECT: A GLIMPSE INTO THE TURKMEN TOURISM INDUSTRY

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Embassy officials met with representatives of Turkmenistan's primary official tourism agency, Ashgabatsiyakhat to discuss tourist programs in Turkmenistan. Official Turkmen tourism focuses on providing controlled visits for tourists to cultural sites, nature parks and adventure tours in the desert. The Turkmen have also taken initial steps to attempt to make tourism to Turkmenistan more accessible by providing on-line tourist information in English and Russian. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

2 (SBU) On January 8, PAO met with Mr. Yagmurgeldi Durdiyev, the General Manager the Grand Turkmen Hotel and the State Enterprise Ashgabatsiyakhat. Founded in 1994, Ashgabatsiyakhat is the main entity of several government tourism and travel companies. Operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism and Sport, Ashgabatsiyakhat provides organized tours of Turkmenistan for foreigners and locals as well as travel arrangements for citizens of Turkmenistan traveling outside of Turkmenistan.

A TYPICAL "CHINOVNIK"

¶3. (C) Initially, Mr. Durdiyev refused to meet with the PAO, but relented when he was assured that the conversation would only focus on private tours and excursions and not on Embassy business. Speaking poor Russian, Mr. Durdiyev seemed uncomfortable answering questions about the tours offered by Ashgabatsiyakhat and downright unfamiliar with even the most basic information about tourist sites throughout Turkmenistan. His office was similar to those of most Turkmen government officials with the obligatory cabinet of Berdimuhamedov books and photo of the President.

CULTURE, ADVENTURE, AND TREKKING!

¶4. (C) Eventually, Mr. Durdiyev invited an experienced guide into the room, Mr. Artik Ataev, to provide details on the programs offered by Ashgabatsiyakhat. Mr. Ataev, a graduate of a military college, spoke excellent Russian, seemed conversant in Turkmen, and had decent English. He explained that the tours fall into three general categories - cultural,

adventure, and trekking. The cultural tours focus on the three UNESCO sites in Turkmenistan -- Konye Urgench, Merv, and Nissa -- while the trekking tours allowed tourist to travel with guides to one of the national parks in Turkmenistan. Adventure touring consists of jeep and horse rides through the desert. He added that Ashgabatsiyakhat had access to several hotels and tourist bases that give them by far the best network to support tourism.

BROCHURES, A WEBSITE, AND EVEN YOUTUBE

¶ 15. (SBU) Mr. Durdiyev provided several English-language brochures and journals about tourism in Turkmenistan, all produced by Ashgabatsiyakhat and/or the Ministry of Tourism and Sport. Beyond the obligatory newer brochures on Awaza, several of the brochures listed detailed itineraries for travel throughout the various provinces of Turkmenistan and even a themed tour - "In the steps of Alexander." All of the materials listed an email address and a few included the website "www.ashgabattravel.com" A cursory glance at the websites shows that it too provides detailed proposed itineraries, English and Russian language descriptions and photographs. Interestingly, every tour includes a mandatory visit to the Arch of Neutrality (the rotating golden statue of Niyazov). A cursory search of YouTube.com produced an interesting video also produced by Ashgabatsiyakhat.

¶ 16. (C) COMMENT. The "siyakhat" network seems to have inherited the old soviet Intourist infrastructure and made a few upgrades. They inherited the typical mid-level bureaucrat that knows little about the organization's

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operations, the network of hotels and tourist bases, the strict Soviet visa regime and correspondent group of tour guides/informants. Despite the downsides, it is hard to imagine touring Turkmenistan without a local guide since there are few if any detailed maps, most of the historic sites are unmarked, and the parks are closed unless you have a specific access permit.

CURRAN